

Commissioner's Weekly Wrap Up

DCS Communications Office

June 17, 2005

Southwest Recruitment Unit Hosts Foster Family Picnic

Submitted by Erica Thomas, Case Manager 3, Adoption Assistance and Recruitment, Jackson, Tenn.



Frankie Douglas and her adopted children, Terra and Jaylon Douglas.

The Department of Children's Services Southwest recruitment unit hosted a picnic on June 4 at Highland Park in Jackson, where foster parents in the Madison County area enjoyed beautiful weather, a variety of fun and food, and solid participation by foster families and their children.

Entertainment included appearances by local fire and police departments, who brought a fire truck and police cruiser for children to explore. Pat Winston, author of the highly popular series of children's books that include Earl the Emu and Jimmie Lynn the Clown, was also there to read to the children.

Foster parents received a variety of prizes. Back Yard Barbecue catered the food, which included chicken, hamburgers and hot dogs with all the trimmings, drinks and desserts.

Ad Hoc Reporting

Submitted by Thomas Riche, Deputy Commissioner of Administration and Training

In an effort to minimize ad hoc reporting, we will be developing and regularly providing various outcome data and monthly reports on key performance indicators over the next several months, with respect to child safety, child permanency and child & family well-being. We will also be evaluating and improving our timely delivery of these data to the regions, Core Leadership and other interested parties in an effort to provide the data necessary to manage statewide and regional service delivery on a regular schedule.

Realizing this will take some time to fully accomplish, in the interim, we have established the following guidelines for securing data critical to service delivery and meeting regional outcomes:

- All data requests will be submitted to Jimmy Wilkin from the Office of Information Systems (OIS). To ensure timely responses, all requests will be reviewed and prioritized in the following manner:
 - All requests from legislatures or the Governor's office. These requests must be routed through the Commissioner or one of the Deputy Commissioners for review.
 - All requests significantly impacting statewide service delivery and not currently available through existing reports.
 - Any regional data requests related to direct service and not available through existing data sets.
 - National surveys from federal government and well respected professional agencies.

Other requests as time allows

Jimmy's email address is jimmy.wilkin@state.tn.us. Jimmy's phone number is: (615) 253-1013. You may call him for information but please submit all requests in writing or email.

Who, and what, is the DCS Ombudsman?

Submitted by Tammy Feldman, Director, Office of the Ombudsman

Let me begin by sharing one of my favorite e-mails that I received last year. I am not certain if it is a true story or not, but in my mind, I would like to think it's true. Either way, I believe it has a great meaning, which is pointed out at the end of the story.

The Cab Ride

Twenty years ago, I drove a cab for a living. When I arrived at 2:30 a.m., the building was dark, except for a single light in a ground floor window. Under these circumstances, many drivers would just honk once or twice, wait a minute, and then drive away. But I had seen too many impoverished people who depended on taxis as their only means of transportation. Unless a

situation smelled of danger, I always went to the door. This passenger might be someone who needs my assistance, I reasoned to myself. So I walked to the door and knocked.

“Just a minute”, answered a frail, elderly voice.

I could hear something being dragged across the floor. After a long pause, the door opened. A small woman in her 80s stood before me. She was wearing a print dress and a pillbox hat with a veil pinned on it, like somebody out of a 1940s movie. By her side was a small nylon suitcase.

The apartment looked as if no one had lived in it for years. All the furniture was covered with sheets. There were no clocks on the walls, no knickknacks or utensils on the counters. In the corner was a cardboard box filled with photos and glassware.

“Would you carry my bag out to the car?” she asked.

I took the suitcase to the cab, and then returned to assist the woman. She took my arm and we walked slowly toward the curb. She kept thanking me for my kindness.

“It’s nothing,” I told her. “I just try to treat my passengers the way I would want my mother treated.”

“Oh, you’re such a good boy,” she said.

When we got in the cab, she gave me an address, and then asked, “Could you drive through downtown?”

“It’s not the shortest way,” I answered quickly.

“Oh, I don’t mind,” she said. “I’m in no hurry. I’m on my way to a hospice.”

I looked in the rearview mirror. Her eyes were glistening.

“I don’t have any family left,” she continued. “The doctor says I don’t have very long.”

I quietly reached over and shut off the meter. “What route would you like me to take?” I asked.

For the next two hours, we drove through the city. She showed me the building where she had once worked as an elevator operator. We drove through the neighborhood where she and her husband had lived when they were newlyweds. She had me pull up in front of a furniture warehouse that had once been a ballroom where she had gone dancing as a girl. Sometimes she’d ask me to slow in front of a particular building or corner and would sit staring into the darkness, saying nothing. As the first hint of sun was creasing the horizon, she suddenly said, “I’m tired. Let’s go now.”

We drove in silence to the address she had given me. It was a low building, like a small convalescent home, with a driveway that passed under a portico. Two orderlies came out to the

cab as soon as we pulled up. They were intent, watching her every move. They must have been expecting her. I opened the trunk and took the small suitcase to the door. The woman was already seated in a wheelchair.

“How much do I owe you?” she asked, reaching into her purse.

“Nothing,” I said.

“You have to make a living,” she replied.

“There are other passengers,” I said.

Almost without thinking, I bent and gave her a hug. She held onto me tightly.

“You gave an old woman a little moment of joy,” she said. “Thank you.”

I squeezed her hand, and then walked into the dim morning light. Behind me, a door shut. It was the sound of the closing of a life. I didn’t pick up any more passengers that shift. I drove aimlessly, lost in thought. For the rest of that day, I could hardly talk. What if that woman had gotten an angry driver, or one who was impatient to end his shift? What if I had refused to take the run, or had honked once, then driven away? On a quick review, I don’t think that I have done anything more important in my life. We’re conditioned to think that our lives revolve around great moments. But great moments often catch us unaware – beautifully wrapped in what others may consider a small one.

People may not remember exactly what you did, or what you said, but they will always remember how you made them feel.

I truly believe this above statement can really relate to all the different people with whom the Ombudsman’s Office, as well as staff throughout our department come into contact with and interact with each day. So when dealing with frustrated people with numerous ongoing complaints and/or concerns, I often find myself referring back to the above statement. I believe it helps to serve as sort of a friendly reminder of what we are here to do.

So if you receive a phone call or e-mail from one of the Ombudsman’s staff, hopefully you will now be able to better understand who we are, what we do and why we are contacting you. The Ombudsman’s Division strives to help resolve concerns and complaints that come to our DCS’s attention through various sources. We do this in the hopes that we may help improve the integrity, accountability and credibility of the department by appropriately and accurately responding to people’s concerns.

Ombudsman’s Division

The Ombudsman Division listens to concerns and complaints, answers questions, and assists in resolving a variety of problems for the benefit of children and families each year.

We receive inquiries, complaints, concerns and questions from:

- Our 1-800-861-1935 toll-free hotline
- Phone calls and/or cases sent to us directly from the Commissioner's office
- Letters received from the general public
- Letters received from legislators on behalf of their constituents
- The Governor's office

The DCS Ombudsman is not authorized to make, change or set aside law and policy. The DCS Ombudsman can take the appropriate action to aid in the resolution of a specific issue or systemic problem.

For inquiries, concerns or complaints, call the Ombudsman's Office at 1-800-861-1935, e-mail DCS.Ombudsman@state.tn.us, or write to Department of Children's Services, Office of the Ombudsman, 436 6th Ave. N., Nashville, TN 37243.

Continuous Quality Improvement: Office Morale

Submitted by Karen Davenport, Statistical Analyst II, Continuous Quality Improvement Division

As we all continue our work to incorporate CQI into our daily lives, as well as the many other changes that have occurred at DCS this past year, one thing that needs to be a focus is office morale. When you improve your office morale, you can see the results manifest in optimal productivity, a positive attitude towards coworkers, management, children and families, an eagerness to come to work, increased attention to details, a lessened "us vs. them" mentality, a feeling of being appreciated and/or respected, believing one's work is meaningful and feeling part of a team.

Improving office morale may not be an easy task. Casey McNeal, a Maryland management consultant, says, "There are occasionally toxic employees who act as catalysts in deflating staff morale. People who are chronically angry or depressed bring others down with their negative attitudes and behaviors. Such an individual can infect others and perpetuate a negative environment. This will have a negative impact on your attempts to improve office morale."

McNeal suggests that employees identify the ringleaders, who must be held accountable if their behavior is having a negative impact on the morale of others.

Rick Kellerman, chair of the Department of Family and Community Medicine at the University of Kansas School of Medicine, offers these suggestions when you are faced with this type of individual:

- Pull the person aside to discuss the issue one-on-one in private.

- Try to identify any extenuating circumstances, such as problems at home, personality conflict with an employee, depression or other issues.
- Explain the problems that are being caused by his/her poor morale and negative behaviors.
- Clearly set your expectations for how the behavior will change.
- Monitor the change and praise any improvement.

There are many ways to boost morale with incentives, but not all of them cost money. McNeal offers several cost-efficient alternatives, including:

- Celebrating employee anniversaries with the organization
- Dining together, ordering a pizza, for example, so that staff and management can socialize.
- Lighten up! Have a silly contest for ugliest shoes, or post staff baby pictures and guess who they are.
- Have colleague recognition awards for outstanding support or service.
- Take time to listen to an employee's ideas.

Random Moment Study

Submitted by Jackie D. White, Director of Accounting Services

For many DCS employees, the Random Moment Study (RMS) is something you complete even if you don't fully understand it. This year, the department is placing a lot of focus on the accuracy and completeness of the RMS. Why? Because RMS is the dominant method we use to spread our administrative cost among various federal and state programs. And it is the way we generate the payment rate for targeted case management (TCM). That's right. Your salary and related costs, TCM billing, plus other federal programs are affected by how accurately you respond to the RMS.

All of our efforts to improve the availability of training and reduce caseloads are dependent upon our ability to rightfully claim federal and state dollars. The only way the federal government allows us to do that is by showing how employees spend their time on various federal and state programs using a statistically valid method. That's RMS.

If RMS isn't valid and if we don't follow all of the rules set by the federal government, we lose "opportunity" dollars and risk a federal penalty. For example, one of the key federal requirements is that the observer completes the moment within 24 hours. Unfortunately, we have some issues. It is important that all observers complete their moments within 24 hours and do so consistently.

Throughout the year, you have been given targets for improvement. A few regions have responded consistently and well. But to have the needed impact, every region must show consistent improvement in accurately reporting an employee's time. As we approach the end of

the state fiscal year, we have noticed from the weekly RMS reports a slippage in the percentage of staff working on a case.

We are putting a spotlight on RMS so that you know how truly important this function is to the department. And we plan on keeping the spotlight on RMS beginning with an RMS Train-the-Trainer session on June 30. Look for more frequent focus on RMS in the year ahead.

Core Leadership

Core Leadership Meeting Debra Valentine, Presiding June 14, 2005

Commissioner's Comments

Budget improvements requests for next year need to be submitted to Joe Cimino immediately. Foster parent improvement funds will be requested. The most current document can be found on the Intranet.

We have had funds to help us close at the end of this fiscal year, but these funds will not exist next year. Other areas will have to be cut if we over spend next year. Areas that strain the budget include:

- Increases in residential care
- Rate increases for foster and adoptive parents
- Reduction in custody numbers
- Transfer from residential to DCS foster care has not occurred

We need to continue to focus on Random Moment Study (RMS). Bonnie Hommrich said that the regions have improved generating money but still have problems with spending. The Commissioner said we are still experiencing serious issues with runaways and detention beds. We are taking the position of not paying private providers for runaways or detention beds. A small group will meet to write parameters of what the department will and will not pay for.

Moreover, overtime needs to be under control. Executive directors need to sign off on overtime in their units. Joe Cimino will be monitoring overtime for the next quarter. Only regional administrators can approve overtime in the regions within the next couple of weeks.

Path to Excellence (P2E) Monitor's Report

William Haynes is developing a comprehensive human resources management plan. We hope to have the plan completed by the end of the month for the Office of the Attorney General to

review. The plan will also be submitted to the Technical Assistance Committee (TAC) and plaintiffs.

The human resources management plan and data reports were the two major concerns of the plaintiffs. Rhonda Simpson, Daryl Chansuthus and Judy Cole are going to Baltimore this week to meet with the TAC and have a conference call with the plaintiffs.

Juvenile Justice Statistics

Ken Steverson distributed information on statewide juvenile justice statistical data. In 2005, many of the delinquent children came into care as a result of technical violations. African-American males are overrepresented in our juvenile justice population. John Brown will generate a report on this data.

DCS Regional Structure Chart Project

Tammy Feldman will lead this project. Willie Williams was acknowledged for his help. This document will eventually be on the Internet for public access and will be updated quarterly.

Needs Assessment Spending Plan

Joe Cimino stated that we will have \$8 million for fiscal year 2006, and \$5.3 million will go to the regions. We need to decrease our reliance on congregate care and increase our foster homes.

Statewide Allocation Breakdown

\$1.7 million – Leveling contract for placement support
\$100,000 – Increase TennCare behavioral health
\$200,000 – Foster parent advocacy
\$200,000 – Omni and F&CS trauma pilot
\$500,000 – Health Unit psychologist
\$320,000 – AGAPE contract

Some funds have also been earmarked for Independent Living.

Juvenile Justice Announcement

The Tennessee Select Committee on Children and Youth will have a forum on juvenile justice issues and concerns on June 23 from 12:30-3:30 p.m. at the Tennessee Children's Home in Spring Hill.



All of us are born for a reason, but all of us don't discover why. Success in life has nothing to do with what you gain in life or accomplish for yourself. It's what you do for others. – Danny Thomas

We'd like to take a moment to wish all of our DCS fathers a happy Father's Day on Sunday, June 19. And, in doing so, we offer the following quotations in recognition of the commitment, heart and effort fatherhood demands.

A father carries pictures where his money used to be. – Author unknown

A truly rich man is one whose children run into his arms even when his hands are empty. – Author unknown

There's no pillow quite as soft as a father's strong shoulder. – Richard L. Evans

